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ABSTRACT

Vocational schools in Slovenia offer 3-year programs in which students aged 14-17 are trained for different professions such as bakers, car mechanics, tailors, etc. Most of the students attending vocational schools were poor academic achievers in elementary school and have little interest in reading. Educators in Slovenia believe that encounters with literature are an important educational opportunity for such students, and for this reason, recent educational reform involves an introduction of mother tongue syllabi for vocational schools in which 40% of class time is devoted to reading literature. The new selection of recommended readings is better suited to the reading interests and abilities of vocational school students. The same goes for the reading strategies and reader response stimuli in the new textbooks. This paper outlines the specific changes that have been made by presenting a selection of works of literature from the new textbooks and the reading strategies taught to connect reading with comprehension, visualization, knowledge, and expression. The paper also presents the results of an empirical study conducted with teachers and students of vocational schools. It points at examples of a modern and holistic curriculum design which encourages reading and striving for personal fulfillment in those students who have so far often been neglected in this respect. (NKA)

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READING LITERATURE
IN SLOVENIAN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

by Boza Krakar Vogel

Vocational schools in Slovenia offer 3-year programmes in which students aged 14 - 17 are trained for different professions such as bakers, car mechanics, tailors, sales assistants... Most of the students attending vocational schools were poor academic achievers in primary school and have little interest in reading.

Unlike the educational authorities of some other countries, we in Slovenia believe that encounters with literature are an important educational opportunity for such students. For this reason, our recent educational reform involves an introduction of mother tongue syllabi for vocational schools in which 40% of class time is devoted to reading literature.

Before the latest reform, which began in 1996, the literature curriculum for vocational schools was basically a shortened version of that for grammar schools. The new selection of recommended readings is better suited to the reading interests and abilities of vocational school students. The same goes for the reading strategies and reader response stimuli in the new textbooks.

My paper outlines the specific changes that have been made by presenting a selection of works of literature from our new textbooks, and the reading strategies taught to connect reading with comprehension, visualization, knowledge and expression. I will also present the results of an empirical study conducted with teachers and students at vocational schools. All this should point at examples of a modern and holistic curriculum design which encourages reading and striving for personal fulfillment also in those students who have so far often been neglected in this respect.

The basic rule of successful reading instruction is to adapt the texts and teaching strategies to the interests and abilities of the learners. As self-evident as this may sound from a modern point of view, it took quite a long time for many institutions in Slovenia to come to this realization and start applying it in practice. From a developmental point of view, this basic rule is not the beginning, but a result of a long process of accumulating experience, accompanied by research work.

My paper will demonstrate the exact workings of this process in Slovenian vocational secondary schools, i.e. those schools in which students are trained to work in various professions rather than prepared to go on to study at universities.

In the Slovenian school system, primary schools are currently being re-shaped on a national level from eight-year programmes into nine-year programmes. Secondary schools offer various types of programmes. Four-year grammar schools () prepare students for university

studies (they could be described as having combined features of British grammar, preparatory and comprehensive schools). Four-year vocational school programmes () train students for certain professions in areas such as business, tourism and engineering, and qualify students for admission to lower-level tertiary programmes in their field. Three- and two-year vocational programmes () aim solely at training students for various professions, mainly in the service sector, while *shortened vocational programmes* merely equip trainees with the skills needed to perform certain types of manual labor. In all these programmes, Slovenian Language and Literature is a core general education subject featuring 30 – 50% literature.

The fact that Slovenian vocational schools teach literature is one of the main features which distinguishes their curriculum from the curricula of vocational schools in some other countries. The reason for including literature into vocational school curricula certainly lies in the fact that in Slovenia, literature has played a central role in the preservation of our language, culture and nationhood through centuries of foreign rule. Since independence (1991), the reasons have expanded to include the meaning of reading literature for personal growth and the socialization of an individual, the development of imagination, creative thinking and empathy[1].

The previously stated reasons for including literature in the curricula of vocational schools were actually the same for all types of secondary school programmes. Because of this however, and because of a lack of awareness that different target populations require different educational approaches[2], the aims and content of teaching literature in vocational schools have traditionally been essentially the same as those for grammar schools. Like in the latter, students of vocational schools were familiarized with the representatives of the canon from the point of view of literary history, beginning with ancient civilizations in their first year, then moving to the Middle Ages, then to Realism and finally, at the end of their schooling, 20th century literature. The syllabus was based on that of grammar schools; the difference was that for vocational schools some more demanding works were left out and thus the quantity of material to be covered was smaller. Readers for vocational schools[3] also had shortened versions of the general literary history sections, less demanding both in terms of content and terminology, and included additional exercises for grammatical analysis, speaking and writing, which were not contained in the grammar school readers.

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[1] At an international seminar in Portorož, Slovenia, a representative from Finland told us that reading literature was introduced into Finnish medical schools because their educators found that a lack of this kind of education before university caused the medical students to lack the ability of empathy.

[2] As we can gather from some articles written by teachers and counsellors (Krakar Vogel 1992), teachers, indeed, saw a need for more thorough differentiation, but this did not manage to have an impact on the curriculum. Curriculum designers have namely traditionally been academics with little or no practical experience of teaching in schools, and so, despite their obvious expertise in the field of literature, have not had a proper awareness of how their ideas of teaching literature relate to students' practical needs.

[3] Some important authors of textbooks for vocational schools were: Kopriva, Remic Jager, Gregorač... Teachers in some of the programmes also prepared their own material packs, some of which evolved into quality textbooks (eg. J. J. Beg).

This was the entire scope of differentiation on the level of curriculum which is in Slovenia traditionally firmly centralized[4] and defines not only the aims but also the content of instruction.

Further adaptation of demanding literary works (eg. Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and some of the Slovenian classics such as Prešeren and Cankar) has been left to individual teachers. As observations of classroom practice have shown, some of them, using personal approaches and interesting motivational techniques, have had good success with their vocational school students. However, some of the teachers 'reformed' their teaching in inappropriate ways, by teaching to their students the findings of modern literary sciences and expecting them to understand and interpret literary texts far removed from their personal experience, even when the teachers themselves noticed that their students often had trouble even reading simple newspaper articles. What feelings such an approach to teaching literature produced in a novice teacher, who tried to follow the 'official doctrine', is best expressed in her own words. *'Five years ago a young teacher of Slovenian walked into the classroom for the first time, putting on an air of self-confidence. The classroom was old, the walls and desks full of graffiti, the chairs wobbly. The third year students sitting in them were all boys, future car mechanics. A month or two went by. For a few lessons they listened to her. She kept bringing in xeroxed copies of some poems, insisting that they bring their readers to class, and making them write in their notebooks. Then she checked the students' responses. Here is a typical one. 'I didn't have any response to the poem because I don't understand it – it is all in rhymes and it is stupid anyway. But the main thing is to know something about the author. And to pass the final exam.'* (Piškur 1999:3)

Students, apparently, did not see reading literature as something worth the effort. Teachers may enjoy it, but it means nothing to them. *'Madam, I see that you, who are well-read, like these books and this kind of language, but I read little, and when I do read, I want to read books that I like and understand.'* (ibid. 31)

A curriculum and teaching strategies that were not learner-centered thus failed to overcome the distrust of vocational school students, who are characterized by poor academic achievement, discipline problems, an aversion to reading and studying and a general reluctance to engage in intellectual activity. It is a well-known fact that the fostering of trust depends largely on the teacher, but the teacher's actions in turn depend on the curriculum, so vocational school teachers of literature found themselves in a vicious circle.

In the early 80s, the already poor curricular differentiation shrank even further. A school reform which introduced the so-called directed education did away with grammar schools, which were politically undesirable from the extreme socialist point of view as they 'fostered the creation of a social elite'. Instead of the division into grammar and vocational schools, the new policy divided all schools into different *'smeri'* (orientations; hence the term *'usmerjeno izobraževanje'*). The curriculum of the first two years of all secondary programmes was

[4] The new national curricula are still centralized to a certain extent, but teachers can now choose among several alternatives in terms of content / literary works to be taught. This has some disadvantages, but also an important advantage. It rules out the possibility of an individual teacher selecting what to teach solely on the basis of his or her personal preferences. (In some other countries there are cases where certain teachers or institutions do not teach poetry or modern literature but focus only on one genre.) Slovenian teachers seem to find the range of options offered in the new curriculum an appropriate solution as they do not oppose the principle of curricular design involved, but they have reservations about the literary works offered to them to choose from.

unified, so that students at all schools studied exactly the same subject matter. For example, they all studied the same works of Shakespeare or Dante with the same depth of exploration. Some authors, who were previously read in grammar schools, were left out of the *'usmerjeni'* curriculum, and some socialist ideologists such as Edvard Kardelj found tneir place among representatives of high literary art. The reform was supposed to develop in the direction of completely wiping out the national distinctions in the educational systems of the Yugoslav republics. The reformers planned to introduce a 'common educational core' for the whole of Yugoslavia, which would require Slovenian students to read the same authors as Serbian students (a mixture of Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian,... authors), since the doctrine of the time was that all of the ethnic groups formed one nation, the Yugoslavs. These plans, however, were too far removed from the reality of the cultural and national differences that had been formed through centuries and were even acknowledged in the constitution. The reform never took deep root, and the unified system of *'usmerjeno izobraževanje'* soon began to show some differentiation. At the end of the 80s, the grammar schools came back, and secondary school programmes in general began to redefine themselves according to actual needs and aims. These processes were given an additional boost when Slovenia became independent in 1991. New legislation in the field of education was passed in 1996, and a curricular reform was initiated on all levels. New curricula were completed in 1998 and we are currently in the phase of monitoring their application in practice and producing new textbooks.

Among the processes of differentiation according to aims and content which followed the period of *'usmerjeno izobraževanje'*, much knowledge accumulated in the field of teaching literature in vocational schools, some derived from qualitative empirical research. This was a basis for the theoretical principles of differentiation which are stated in the 1998 curricula and now applied in practice.

Let us look at some findings of research on reading and literary competence of students in three-year vocational schools which has contributed to an awareness of their needs, clearer goal-setting, better teacher training and, consequently, more successful teaching of literature.

What is it that future car mechanics, cooks, tailors etc. like to read? Mostly newspapers and magazines with little text. Under books students listed titles such as *Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, Five Friends, Asterix*, and works of Slovenian youth fiction authors such as Desa Muck, Vitan Mal and Nejka Omahen. Many, however, read books only because it is required. Most of them never even come into contact with books outside of school; their families don't purchase them and they do not go to libraries in their spare time.

As far as genre is concerned, prose definitely prevails over poetry and drama, and even with prose more voluminous texts are avoided. Interestingly, the students find it important to read Slovenian classics, even though they do not enjoy it, as they feel that *'we need to know something about Slovenian writers because they are a part of our culture and history.'* (Lampič 1996, Piškur 1999:25).

When reading a book, they mostly pay attention to the plot and the protagonists, with whom they identify on an emotional level. If they come across shorter textual elements that they do not understand (individual words or names), they simply ignore them. They also skip boring long descriptions. If there are too many such elements, they put the book away.

The students' answers indicate that we are dealing with a reader who is somewhere between the *reader hero* that Appleby places between the ages of 7 to 12, and a thinking adolescent reader. They like adventure stories "in which characters face danger and resourcefully come through it... then there are fantasies that involve journeys to other worlds and heroic deeds take place there before the hero returns victoriously...(Appleyard 191:60). At the same time they have some awareness of their reading process, their thoughts and feelings, and a certain kind of aesthetic distance. They know 'it is not real' and are willing to talk about it if properly motivated. However, they still read 'through the text', without taking into account its literary qualities (eg. formal components, the role of a narrator...).

This reader profile is a realistic point of departure for successful teaching of literature which will provide students with positive experiences and make them keener to read. This does not, of course, imply that we should merely adapt to their existing horizon of expectations and have them read only comics, adventure books and trivial romances. It does, however, mean, that we need to start the journey towards some higher aims (various types of communicative reading, classics and modern genres) at this realistic point, not with Sophocles or Dante. This fact was difficult to accept for many teachers who were not familiar with the kinds of books students enjoyed and did not appreciate them. Even now there are some who turn teaching literature into a self-sufficient scientism, and lecture to students about things they cannot comprehend. However, as we shall see, research shows that in the past decade teachers have come a long way in accepting the changes, significantly aided by continuing education and new textbooks.

The first step, however, was the new curriculum, one of the results of the previously mentioned school reform which took place between 1996 and 1999, and which changed the concept of teaching literature in vocational schools from the point of view of aims and content.

As far as content is concerned, the main changes were that works to be discussed are no longer chronologically ordered from old to modern, and the repertoire is no longer limited to a selection of canonical works. Students are now familiarized with literary works in thematic groups, according to the different ways these are linked with real life. For example, they compare visual and textual communication in an advertisement and a comic, an ordinary and a literary letter (with an extract from *The Lady With Camelias*), a personal and a literary diary (eg. with Charriere's *The Butterfly*). They read recipes, instructions, memos and invitations written in a literary style, and learn to distinguish between a newspaper and a literary report (eg. with *The Good Soldier Švejk*), between a CV and a biography etc. Most of the texts are taken from Slovenian literature, and many have a humourous component. Topics range from adventure, romance and history to modern living, family problems and science fiction. From a literary point of view, the texts are not the most demanding, and are characterized by vivid plots and communicative language, whether the authors are representatives of the canon or of modern genres.

In the final year, a chronological overview is made of the development of Slovenian literature since 16th century, and the main features of each period are outlined. We believe that this is a minimum of general knowledge for every citizen of Slovenia, since through centuries literature has been one of the main factors of our nationhood. The consciousness of this role of literature is a means of forming the Slovenian social identity. Of course, rather than requiring

vocational school students to read the most demanding classics, the less demanding works of the greatest Slovenian authors have been selected, and the descriptions of literary periods are not overly packed with facts. This 'traditional' way of rounding off the teaching of literature in vocational programmes might appear somewhat more conservative than the teaching of literature in comparable programmes in other countries. However, it must be pointed out that some countries with similar historical backgrounds as Slovenian still have a fair share of national literary histories in their curricula.

Selection of appropriate texts is not the only factor which contributes to successful literature instruction. We also need to systematically introduce activities which open up the texts and make the students feel that reading is something they are mastering.

Before the reform, i.e. before the new views of teaching literature found their way into practice, the main student activity in literature classes was writing. Students were hurriedly writing down the teacher's explanations about authors, their works and other facts of literary history. Then they reproduced those facts in tests as a way of proving their knowledge of literature, and passed their classes based on grades attained in this way. They did read as well, but teachers mostly assigned that for homework, as there was no time for reading in class due to the great amount of subject matter to be 'covered'. Creative writing, writing about students' experience and imaginations, was also primarily homework and part of obligatory essay tests, for which there was very little preparation. There was little systematic development of speaking skills, and no training in listening skills.

All this has now been changed. In accordance with the new curriculum, the basic activities in a literature class are reading and guided discussion, which ensures that the students understand the readings and can talk about their experiences and express their opinions. There is also a lot of reading aloud, listening and viewing of filmed version of works of literature. Students are encouraged to express their perceptions of the texts read both in speech and in writing. When students are required to respond to a reading text in writing, they mostly produce shorter, less demanding text types such as summaries or descriptions of characters. Other tasks range from developing a story to dramatization to 'translating' a poem into a prose passage. The possibilities of using electronic mail are not widely exploited (writing to authors or other 'literature people', writing to peers about reading literature). This is probably due to the fact that, as some research has shown, our students do not have much desire to use electronic mail to discuss literature (Krakar Vogel 2001). Guided text analysis focuses more on the recognizable features of content than on the formal text characteristics. Vocational school students are encouraged to evaluate texts on the basis of their own experience rather than from a literary point of view, which would be expected of grammar school students. Fluent reading aloud and an oral presentation of what they have read is a part of the final exam. Knowing literary theory is not primarily a matter of being able to define terms, but being able to recognize and name things students encounter in a text (eg. whether the text is a short story or a lyrical poem, whether it has stanzas or chapters, is stylistically simple or complex, whether the language is literary or colloquial etc.) At the end of their schooling students learn about the most important representatives of Slovenian literature through the ages, and read their works. The final exam tests their familiarity with the authors, their lives and times in which they lived, and their works that have been read. The curriculum includes ten authors from the 16th to the 20th century, presented through one text each; the texts include several poems and prose passages, one short story and one comedy.

The reform of teaching literature in vocational schools that has been introduced with the new curriculum of 1998 has been supported by the publication of a series of textbooks called *Potovanje besed* (A Journey of Words) by Jana Kvas. Her textbooks have a clear didactic outline with a progression from the familiar to the new. They include literary texts, explanations, questions, pictures and charts, and are complemented by a series of workbooks.

As an illustration of the qualities of the textbook, let us take a look at the chapter on comics in the first book of the series, *Journey of Words 1* (1996). The first section is called 'Warm-up activities', which provides questions such as 'Which art uses words as its means of expression? Which art is drawing? Have you read any comics? If yes, say what its main features are. If you like to read comics, say what you like about them.' (24) The next section, called 'Some things you know already and some you will learn now' defines a comic strip as a story consisting of text and pictures, and explains the role of each component (eg. 'Authors usually put linguistic messages into speech bubbles, which, like drawings, are a recognizable feature of comic strips. They contain the words of the characters... However, the speech bubbles do not necessarily only contain words. Authors also use other signs such as punctuation marks or little drawings which replace words or even whole sentences.' (26) The textbook author goes on to briefly present the different types of comics ('realistic types – adventure, SF, westerns... vs. caricature comics), the length of comics (from one line to a whole book), and discusses the question of whether comics are art. 'The answer to this question is yes or no... Commercial comics make the reader mostly interested in key situations... Their language is simple, unambiguous; we read them fast and superficially. Art comics have a carefully constructed plot, and so demand the reader to pay attention to every event and character. Characters are not just good or bad but show themselves to the reader as different at different moments... The language is more demanding, with several meanings, used creatively. That's why we have to read an art comic more slowly and thoroughly.' (30) The further sections of the textbook unit are called 'How old is the comic strip' (history of genre, p.30), 'What does a comic strip talk about', 'Good and famous comics' (eg. *Mickey Mouse, Asterix and Obelix*). The final section, called 'You know the answer' contains questions such as 'Which are the basic elements of a comic strip?, What is the role of drawings in a comic strip?, Are comics art? Support your answer., Who reads comics?, With what purpose?, At home, read two shorter comics; a commercial one and an art one. In class, explain the differences between them.' (33) The workbook supplements the textbook unit with activities which require reading, writing and even drawing.

The significance of the new curriculum and textbook is that they draw on the student's everyday experience and that they guide him/her towards reflective observation gradually, with easy-to-master steps and in simple language. In cases of texts which are really close to the readers' experience, such as with comics, this can even lead to dealing with complex questions of aesthetic evaluation. Even though readers' experiences are always the point of departure, they are by no means the aim of literature teaching. The aim is to supplement experience with reflection, new information and enhanced responses. We have thus managed to do away with the old and entirely inappropriate approaches to teaching literature as something beyond the learner's reach, while avoiding the pitfall of exaggeration which some educationalists profess and which puts the authority of the reader above all else and seeks only to adapt to the reader's tastes (Dahrendorf).

How were all the novelties accepted by teachers and students? In a survey done by M. Piškur in 1999 as part of her BA project, 100 first-year students and 100 third-year students of vocational schools (in programmes for car mechanics) were asked about their reading habits, abilities and interests. Around 60 % of students from both groups answered affirmatively to the question if they liked the texts in the textbook. The author of the study considers this a satisfactory result, especially compared to the unpopularity of literature classes before the reform, when similar questionnaires revealed a very low interest in texts read in school. The popularity of poetry, however, still does not exceed 30 %. The most notable increase in popularity has been in the area of drama (the Slovenian comedy *'Matiček se ženi'* (Matiček's Wedding Day), which is an adaptation of Beaumarchaise's *Figaro's Wedding*). The study further showed that monotony in class activities is one of the most offputting factors for students, and that further success of the reform depends mostly on teachers, who still tend to cling to established stereotypes and are slow to introduce new didactic approaches and new works of literature suitable to their students' needs.[5]

Some surveys about the reform process have also been carried out among teachers (Tekavec 1999). The main questions asked were how the teachers evaluate the changes and at what pace individual changes are being applied in practice. 42 teachers from different vocational schools around the country mostly evaluate the curriculum reform of 3-year vocational programmes as something positive (3 said excellent, 20 good, 16 acceptable and 3 poor). A similar evaluation applies to the new textbooks, which the teachers consider 'well-supported, motivating and really the only textbooks we've got'. It is true, however, that some teachers resent the absence of a chronological overview of world literature and the explicitness of the textbooks. They also suggest that some texts which they find too demanding be substituted (eg. Brecht's *Ballad of the Poor B. B.*, extract from Charriere's *TheButterfly*, extract from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in the first year or extracts from Balzac's *Father Goriot*, Hašek's *Švejk* and Cankar's short stories in the upper grades.) It is interesting note that they themselves do not substitute these texts with others but teach from the textbook although they disagree with the inclusion of these texts.

Judging from these answers about the reform in general, the reform has good chances of succeeding in bringing literature closer to young readers. However, teachers' answers to questions about their didactic approaches point to the fact that it will take quite some time and effort to thoroughly transform classroom practices. Classroom procedures now indeed involve students more and make them more active, but there is still not enough variety. Teachers deal with each new topic / text following the same pattern of activities, so that students always know in advance that reading is followed by discussion, discussion by writing and so on. Too little attention is paid to pre-reading activities (warm-ups, creating motivation). Teachers do not fully exploit connections between students' real-life experience and literary texts to be read. Also, creative activities such as drawing, singing and physical activity are underused, especially compared to the overuse of the same activities in primary schools. Not enough opportunity is provided for students to express their spontaneous responses to the text and creative follow-ups in the sense of 'What happens next? What is the title of this story? How do you understand the ending?' Discussion of texts is often stereotypical – the teacher asks questions and the students answer. The teachers mostly use lockstep activities and very rarely

[5] It is interesting that some students expressed a dislike of the more active forms of dealing with a work of literature as well: answering questions in the textbook or reading aloud in class. Perhaps this happens when a teacher overuses some of these approaches and does not vary them with other types of activities, which would of course downplay their 'modernity' and reduce their motivational potential and effectiveness.

individual or groupwork. Teachers also do not always manage to show how some older literary works are relevant in the 21st century, do not organize discussions of works read as home assignments, and underuse filmed versions of novels and plays. All these would be more feasible if teachers prepared their classes further in advance, i.e. planned the content and methods for a whole school year. This would enable them to deal with the chosen texts and use different approaches more strategically and prevent students from getting bored with even interesting texts.[6]

The surveys quoted as well as other types of research (observation and personal communication) show that the reform of teaching literature in vocational schools has so far successfully introduced more student-centeredness at the level of curriculum and materials development. Of course, there is some room for further improvement at this level, but this is even more necessary in classroom practice. Teachers in vocational schools deal with students coming from environments which do not encourage them to read, so they often need to compensate for this lack of encouragement in the family and broader social environment. To succeed in doing so, teachers will have to continually upgrade their own professional skills in programs of continuing education, as well as adapt their expectations to the reality of their students, who need instruction quite different from that which would suit more academic audiences that the teachers themselves were members of during their own schooling.

The changes that have been introduced into teaching literature in Slovenian vocational schools due to the recent reform may not seem striking to many of the readers of this article, since the principles of reading and the reader-text relationship they are based on are not revolutionary. Surely, in larger countries there are more materials and professional development experts available to make reforms more efficient, while Slovenia with two million inhabitants has but one team of experts for each area of educational reform. In view of that, the mother tongue and literature committee has certainly done a commendable job. It has managed to bring literature closer to students and at the same time uphold those elements of educational tradition that are essential to Slovenian culture.

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[6] Experience shows that motivating approaches can make students interested and involved in reading even such 'boring' classics as Ivan Cankar. I. Koželj Učakar (1997) shows a model of teaching a series of Cankar's short stories *Iz tujega življenja* (From a Foreign Life). The main pre-reading activity was word formation practice using the word stem 'živ-' (from the keyword from the title) and using the words to write a composition. After that, the teacher explained to the students the activities that would follow. They read one short story together in class, then each student read one at home and the class discussed that. As a result, most of the students really read their story and actively formed an opinion about it, which had not usually been the case before. The students' emotional reactions proved that they identified and empathised with the animals which are the main characters of these stories, even though they disliked the gaps in the stories and the places which left too much room for interpretation. The students told the teacher that they enjoyed such literature classes because they were different from what they had been used to.